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ABSTRACT

While much of the research on sex roles has treated gender self-perceptions and stereotypes in terms of chronic traits, sex role stereotypes may apply to specific situations and activities as they do to more global traits. Perceptions of masculinity and femininity, therefore, may vary across situations. This study used a situational approach to examine issues of sex role identity and to look more closely at the similarity and accuracy of people's perceptions of the opposite sex. Male (N=52) and female (N=64) college students rated how masculine or feminine they felt in each of 30 situations that varied in their apparent relevance to sex roles. One-half of the subjects also completed the ratings as they thought a typical member of the opposite sex would feel in those same situations. In a second study, 30 males and 30 females provided self-descriptions using the same situations and rating scale mentioned above and also completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory. The results suggest that the salience of own-gender identity varies considerably across situations and is particularly heightened when interacting with the opposite sex in what might be regarded as a romantic way. These findings complement the trait approach to sex roles in showing that gender identity is not necessarily a constant, but can be accentuated, neutralized, or reversed depending on one's activities. The findings also demonstrate that some situations and activities, like some traits, remain sex stereotyped. (NB)

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Situational Influences on Self and Other Perceptions of Femininity and Masculinity

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Situational Influences on Self and Other

Perceptions of Femininity and Masculinity

Much of the research on sex roles has treated gender self perceptions and stereotypes in terms of chronic traits. For example, with the well-known Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), femininity is defined according to the extent a person feels that traits such as cheerful and sensitive apply to themselves, while masculinity is defined in terms of such traits as self-reliant and assertive. While very valuable, this trait-based approach to how males and females see themselves and each other does not afford much recognition to the possibility that perceptions of masculinity and femininity may vary across situations. Most people have no doubt experienced being in a situation or engaging in some activity where they have felt out of role. Anecdotally, some men and boys have said it feels unmanly to wash dishes, and some women and girls have said it feels wrong for them to play rough physical games. At other times, though, people say their activities are suitable to their roles. Thus, some females report it makes them feel very feminine to take a bubble bath, while some males say that going hunting makes them feel very masculine. In short, sex role stereotypes may apply to specific situations and activities as they do to more global traits. Gathering descriptive information about this possibility of situational influences on self perceptions of gender identity was the primary aim of the present research.

A second purpose of this research was to use a situational approach to examine the similarity and accuracy of people's perceptions of the opposite sex. Such comparisons have previously been made using the trait approach, e.g., when males and females are asked to rate the extent to which various traits are "feminine" and "masculine." These comparisons are useful for, among other purposes, tracking historical changes and cultural differences in sex role stereotypes. By making similar comparisons using the situational approach, additional conclusions

might be drawn about how well males and females understand each others' feelings in various circumstances. Since many life situations and activities involve the presence and even direct interaction with the opposite sex, it may be valuable for both sexes to know how salient may be the sex role identity of the others in the situation. Such knowledge may lead to better understanding and smoother relationships in mixed sex activities.

The third purpose of this research was to examine the correspondence between the present situational approach and the more familiar trait-based orientations to sex role identity. Given what is known about state/trait relations generally, it was expected that the two ways of looking at gender roles would be modestly related. If so, each viewpoint would support the validity and value of the other.

Method

Pilot research began by asking male and female college students to list situations and activities in which they have felt feminine and when they felt masculine. These replies were edited and supplemented by the authors to create a list of over 50 briefly phrased situations. Other pilot research subjects rated how masculine, feminine or neither they felt in those situations and also commented on the items and suggested others. From these results, a set of 30 common activities that varied in their apparent relevance to sex roles were selected for further study.

In the first investigation reported here, 64 females and 52 males rated how they felt in each of the 30 situations using a six category scale: very masculine, somewhat masculine, neither, somewhat feminine, very feminine or does not apply. Then, half of both groups also completed the ratings as they thought "a typical member of the opposite sex" would feel in those same situations. In the second study, 30 males and 30 females provided self descriptions using the same situations and rating scale as above and also completed the Bem Sex

Role Inventory. All participants in these studies were college students enrolled in psychology courses who volunteered to serve in the research as a learning experience.

Results

Table 1 lists the 30 activities along with the mean self and opposite sex ratings from the first study. The means are based on a 1 = very masculine to 5 = very feminine scale while deleting the "does not apply" responses. Higher scores, therefore, denote greater perceived femininity. Accordingly, it is not surprising that females' self ratings were higher than males' self rating on almost all of the situations; in fact, the differences are significant at the .01 level for 20 of the 30 situations. Inspection of Table 1 suggests that the salience of own gender identity varies considerably across situations and is particularly heightened when interacting with the opposite sex in what might be regarded as a romantic way. However, a number of situations are such that neither sex feels particularly masculine or feminine. Very few of these 30 activities were associated with feeling "out of role."

In comparing self versus other perceptions, it appears that both actual and perceived similarity varied across situations. Furthermore, both sexes were significantly "inaccurate" in their projections of how the other sex feels in a number of situations,especially those that most often involve direct interaction with the opposite sex, i.e., going on a date, kissing/hugging/petting, and engaging in sexual intercourse. In general, most people said they thought members of the opposite sex felt neither masculine or feminine when engaged in these activities, although they reported exceptionally high own sex identity when engaged in those same activities.

The above findings based on mean ratings come into sharper focus in the five panels of Table 2 which present the various comparisons based on the percent

of respondents who rated themselves and the opposite sex as feeling feminine or masculine. Table 2A lists 12 situations in which a majority or plurality of males said they felt masculine; Table 2C lists 12 situations in which a majority of females said they felt feminine; Table 2B lists seven situations in which most females said they thought the typical male would feel masculine; Table 2D lists 10 situations in which most males said they thought the typical female would feel feminine; and Table 2E lists the situations in which either or both sexes said they felt neither masculine nor feminine.

Comparing Tables 2A and 2B shows there were six situations in which a majority of males said they felt masculine and in which a majority of females said they thought a typical male would feel masculine (e.g., doing dirty, physical labor). Comparing Tables 2C and 2D shows there were eight situations in which a majority of females said they felt feminine and in which a majority of males said they thought a typical female would feel feminine (e.g., getting dressed and grooming). Although entailing a conceptual leap, both comparisons can be considered as indicators of accuracy in perceiving the felt gender identity of the opposite sex. However, there are six activities in Table 2A that are not in 2B, and one activity in 2B that is not in 2A. Also, there are four situations in 2C that are not in 2D, and two in 2D that are not in 2C. These disparities can be considered as indicators of inaccuracy in perceiving the felt gender identity of the opposite sex. As suggested by the earlier analysis of mean scores, the data in Table 2 show three activities that were inaccurately perceived by both sexes, i.e., dating, kissing and intercourse. Finally, Table 2E lists the 12 activities in which most females and males felt neither feminine or masculine (e.g., watching television),four others in which females but not males felt neither (e.g., talking with a group of

women), and seven others in which most males but not females felt neither (e.g., taking care of children). Not shown in Table 2 but also clarified by examining percentages of males and females who selected each response category, is the issue of feeling in the opposite sex role. In only one situation did a majority of males report feeling somewhat or very feminine, i.e., being dependent on someone else. And in only two situations did a majority of females report feeling somewhat or very masculine, i.e., doing dirty physical labor and using profane language.

The results of our second study showed a pattern of self perceptions similar to those reported in Tables 2A, 2C and 2E. (Opposite sex perceptions were not tested.) Aside from replication, the goal of the second study was to correlate responses to our situational assessment of gender identity with a more traditional measure based on stereotypical traits, i.e., the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). For this purpose we computed a simple index of situation-based femininity by adding the number of situations out of 30 in which a person said they felt somewhat or very feminine. Combined over both genders of subjects, this index correlated +.31 with BSRI Femininity, -.33 with BSRI Masculinity, and +.37 with BSRI Androgyny. The first two correlations might be taken as signs of the validity of the situational approach, i.e., the relations are in the directions and of such size as to suggest that the index relates to but is not the same as the trait-based measure. The third correlation could be variously interpreted but may mean that feeling feminine in some but not all situations is associated with androgyny which would be consistent with the meaning of that term.

Discussion

The present research complements the trait approach to sex roles in showing that gender identity is not necessarily a constant, but can be accentuated, neutralized or even reversed depending on one's activities. These studies

also demonstrate that some situations and activities, just as some traits, remain sex stereotyped. The cross sex comparisons reveal that females and males may be accurate in their projections of how the opposite sex feels in some situations, but may be inaccurate in their projections about other situations in which they find themselves most intimately interacting with each other. This suggests a direction for further sharing of self perceptions of gender identity.

These and other possible conclusions must be tempered by recognizing the limitations of these exploratory studies. Self reported feelings in verbally described activities and situations may not be valid indicators of actual experiences in real life for a number of reasons. Moreover, our list of 30 certainly does not exhaust the situations that may be related to varying degrees of self perceived femininity and masculinity or inaccuracies in perceiving the gender identity of others. Also, the sample of respondents used here is small and represents, at best, a narrowly defined population. However, these and other limitations may serve as guides to future study of additional situational effects on gender role perceptions and how these may vary with individual characteristics. Despite their limits, these studies may be regarded as contributing a useful perspective on sex role perceptions by showing that they may be, in part, situationally influenced.

Table 1

Mean Self and Opposite Sex Ratings of Femininity/Masculinity in 30 Activities

Activities	Females self rating	Males self rating	Females rating of males	Males rating of females
1. Engaging in sports	2.6	1.8	2.2	2.7
2. Repairing something	2.6	2.1	2.2	2.3
3. Being dressed up in one's best clothes	4.5	2.4	2.9	3.8
4. Doing household chores	3.6	3.2	3.6	3.7
5. Going on a date	4.1	2.2	2.8	3.5
6. Talking with a group of men	3.5	2.3	2.4	3.2
7. Watching television	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
8. Talking with a group of women	3.4	2.6	2.9	3.6
9. Doing dirty, physical labor	2.4	1.9	2.0	1.9
10. Shopping for clothes	3.8	3.1	3.3	3.9
11. Getting dressed and grooming	4.0	2.8	3.0	3.8
12. Taking a shower	3.3	2.8	2.8	3.2
13. Taking a tub bath	3.7	3.1	3.4	3.7
14. Dancing	3.8	2.9	2.9	3.6
15. Competing with others intellectually	2.9	2.6	2.7	2.9
16. Arguing with someone	3.0	2.5	2.7	2.7
17. Kissing, hugging, "petting"	4.2	2.1	2.7	3.6
18. Studying math, science or mechanics	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.4
19. Studying fine art or literature	3.1	3.1	3.3	3.5
20. Taking care of children	3.8	3.1	3.5	3.8
21. Drinking alcohol	2.8	2.6	2.6	2.5
22. Standing up for own beliefs	3.1	2.4	2.7	2.8
23. Being dependent on someone else	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.7
24. Engaging in sexual intercourse	4.2	2.0	2.5	3.5
25. Showing emotions openly	3.8	3.2	3.7	3.7
26. Wearing jeans	3.0	2.7	2.9	3.0
27. Feeling sad and lonely	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.3
28. Acting as a group leader	2.8	2.2	2.5	2.4
29. Using profane language	2.4	2.4	2.1	1.9
30. Soothing other people's hurt feelings	3.6	2.9	3.4	3.6

Note. These means are based on a scale coded: 1 = very masculine, 3 = neither, 5 = very feminine. All mean differences ≥ 0.5 are significant ($p < .01$ or more).

Table 2A

Situations in Which Most Males Said They Felt Masculine
engaging in sports
repairing something
talking with a group of men
doing dirty, physical labor
acting as a group leader
using profane language*
being dressed up in best clothes
going on a date
talking with a group of women
kissing, hugging, "petting"
standing up for own beliefs*
sexual intercourse

Table 2B

Situations in Which Most Females Said Males Would Feel Masculine
engaging in sports
repairing something
talking with a group of men
doing dirty, physical labor
acting as a group leader
using profane language
studying math, science, mechanics

Table 2C

Situations in Which Most Females Said They Felt Feminine
being dressed up in best clothes
shopping for clothes
getting dressed and grooming
taking a tub bath
dancing
taking care of children
being dependent on someone
showing emotions openly
going on a date
talking with a group of men
kissing, hugging, "petting"
sexual intercourse

Table 2D

Situations in Which Most Males Said Females Would Feel Feminine
being dressed up in best clothes
shopping for clothes
getting dressed and grooming
taking a tub bath
dancing
taking care of children
being dependent on someone
showing emotions openly
doing household chores
soothing other people's feelings

Table 2E

Situations in Which Most Females and/or Males Felt Neither Gender Identity

Both Felt Neither	Females Also Felt Neither	Males Also Felt Neither
doing hoursehold chores	engaging in sports	shopping for clothes
watching television	repairing something	getting dressed and grooming
taking a shower	talking with women	taking a tub bath
competing intellectually	acting as group leader	dancing
arguing with someone		taking care of children
studying math, science		showing emotions openly
studying art, literature		using profane language*
drinking alcohol		
standing up for beliefs*		
wearing jeans		
feeling sad, lonely		
soothing others' feelings		

*Appears in two tables for males because percentages were split 50/50.